

relaxation and simple mindfulness exercises

Objectives

to provide a range of simple exercises that encourage the regular practice of relaxation and to help build resilience with increased awareness of stress activation followed by the body's natural recovery system - the relaxation response

General Guidelines

These exercises have been designed as aids to accompany the introductory workshop provided on November 16th 2017. For reasons of safety and copyright they should not be distributed to anyone that was not at the presentation.

Please note the following general guidelines will help you develop your own relaxation and mindfulness techniques in a safe and progressive way.

However, if you have experienced a traumatic incident such as witnessing pain/death in another person, physical/sexual abuse, a car accident, frightening natural event (earthquake etc.), sudden loss of loved one etc. then it is possible for any mindfulness or similar techniques to trigger the release of powerful and overwhelming sensations. If you are in any doubt about recent or past trauma affecting you then please do not practise such techniques without seeking specialist advice first. This is for your safety and to avoid deepening past trauma. Please take this recommendation seriously as it could make a huge improvement to the quality of your life and future wellbeing. There are professional advisers who specialise in trauma counselling/PTSD. Some conditions such as fibromyalgia may mean some mindfulness and relaxation exercises are not suitable if they heighten pain sensation. For the majority of people, however, the techniques here a simple and very beneficial ones to practise.

First, it is important to remember that, as with most skills development or learning, progress is not always linear. Sometimes we will find it hard to focus our attention and our minds will wander more one day than on other days. Don't try to mentally force the exercises. Enjoy them as peaceful calming moments. Bring a relaxed awareness and a patient mindset to each period of practice. There may be days or weeks when practice feels difficult. This is fine. It is the regular practise that is important and not how well you do in each period of practice.

Second develop at your own pace and don't be influenced by the *apparent* progress of others. If you manage 2 minutes a day for a month that is fine. If you can progress to managing 5 - 10 minutes, 6 days a week and 2 minutes the other day then that's fine too. Slowly build the habit and it will not let you down. Try to practise for too long and you may find it hard to sustain.

As your practice time lengthens and your ability to focus in-the-moment improves it may trigger unexpected physical or emotional releases. If these are comfortable for you while they are happening them remaining aware of them and allowing the release to run its course will probably help your mind and body. If they are uncomfortable or overwhelming then open your eyes and gaze around the room taking in objects, colours, naming them etc. This will help orientate yourself back into the room and the real time of your surroundings. You can also 'ground' yourself by feeling the contact of your feet with the ground and your body in the chair. Experience the feelings of this contact to help settle you.

It is important to discuss any such experiences with an experienced mindfulness, somatic experiencing or EMDR practitioner so that they can guide you as to how to maintain your practice and work through such releases. Always seek advice from your GP if you have any medical health concerns. They are the guardians of your health records and are well placed to provide you with sensible balanced opinion. Mindfulness and relaxation can be very therapeutic and beneficial for our wellbeing but they are not a substitute for your GP.

Preparation

When you are preparing for any period of practice the following will generally help:

- warm, loose clothing is normally more comfortable than tight clothing but there is no reason why you cannot practise some techniques while sitting and dressed formally
- approach each period of practice with an intention - is it to relax: is it to develop your relaxation technique: is it to develop your attentional awareness through a mindfulness technique and so on. If, for example, you are seeking to develop your mindfulness technique then you may wish to do this sitting, standing or moving. If you are seeking to relax then sitting or lying down may be appropriate. If you lie down to practise mindfulness then you may need to open your eyes when feeling sleepy so as to maintain your focus.
- try to find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed - turn off mobiles and other devices

1. Diaphragmatic breathing

The diaphragm is a large muscle located between the chest and the abdomen and is an excellent tool to stimulate the relaxation response. This will result in recovery from sympathetic nervous system activation and a pleasant sense of well being.

Breathing Technique

Place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. Take a deep breath in by trying to push the hand on your stomach out while keeping the hand on your chest still. This helps to pull air into the base of the lungs such that they more fully expand.

It may feel easier to master by breathing in through the nose (as you push your stomach out) and then pursing your lips to breath out through the mouth. Your stomach will naturally sink back. Once you develop a rhythm for this it will feel a lot easier and more natural.

It is important to remember that we improve the depth of our breathing not by inhaling more air but through completely exhaling it. So you may find it helpful to breath in for say a count of 4 (or whatever feels comfortable) and then slowly exhale through your mouth for a count of 5 or 6. i.e. count on the out breath for 1 or 2 more counts. As you become more adept at this technique you can lengthen the count for the out breath.

Repeat the cycle count for long enough for it to feel comfortable and relaxing. Even if you do this technique for a minute a day it will help. It is particularly beneficial to practise when feeling anxious, angry, fearful and upset. It will help create some time and space for your thinking brain to create a sense of perspective and explore other more positive emotions. It is also very beneficial to do for a few minutes when you get in from work - to create a natural break from the activation of the day and all the sympathetic firing of your nervous system. Or maybe before preparing for an interview, presentation etc.

2. Body Scan - to experience the sensations of the body and to relax the mind.

This exercise can be a wonderful aid to improving sleep quality either by helping you fall asleep or getting back to sleep when awake in the night. There is a sitting version described below and a lying down one provided by audio.

Begin by choosing a comfortable place to sit or lie where you won't be disturbed. You may wish to allow between 10 and 20 minutes for this exercise. Sit upright with both feet flat on the floor and your hands resting together or separately on your legs. Alternatively, if circumstances allow, you could do this exercise lying down. If so, place a cushion behind your head and one underneath your knees to support you comfortably. Allow your shoulders to relax. It may help to sit back against the chair to keep your spine upright.

Allow your breathing to settle and observe the gentle rising and falling of your stomach as you breathe. Use the diaphragmatic technique to help this exercise.

Start by focussing your attention to the top of your scalp. Feel your hair and scalp with your mind. Imagine you can feel the air against your scalp. Perhaps, but only if it is relaxing for you, imagine your scalp is being gently massaged. Bring this attention down slowly through your forehead, around your temples and onto your eyelids. Feel your

eyes gently moving behind your eyelids. Allow them to settle and relax. Allow your mind to settle and relax. Continue the gradual movement of bodily awareness down through your cheeks and into your jaw. Allow the jaw to loosen and maybe drop slightly. We often carry tension here.

Then bring your attention to your shoulders, noticing if you have tensed them. If so, allow them to release. Perhaps stay there for a short while, focussing on the sensation of your shoulders beneath your clothes. Allow thoughts to drift in and out without focussing on the content of the thoughts. Notice them and let them go. Do this every time you find your mind wandering. Start becoming used to reflecting on where your mind is and letting the thoughts dissolve as you bring your attention back to your body.

Continue moving your attention throughout and down your body: the back and arms; resting in the hand to experience the feeling of all your fingers and thumbs and palms. Rest for 30 - 60 seconds on your stomach to stay with the rising and falling of the rhythm of your breathing. Enjoy that rhythm and allow it to settle. Continue into the tops of your legs/lower back that are against the chair. Feel that sitting sensation. And then slowly continue down through the rest of your legs until you come to settle in your feet. All the time using your body's sense of feeling to help bring your mind back to the body and away from the thoughts drifting in and out.

Don't fight the thoughts and don't force the body feeling. Accept it will take gentle practice and be kind to yourself. Don't get impatient or frustrated. It will take some time but it will come with practice. We often try to push through events, challenges, life. Get used to enjoying not having to push this practice. Allow yourself to evolve gently and with patience.

Once you have spent several seconds at your feet come back to your stomach and rest there a while enjoying the sense of relaxation and noticing how the whole of your body feels. See if you can notice any changes. Maybe, maybe not. There is no right or wrong. Just become more used to quietly noticing. You may fall briefly asleep during periods of this exercise - this is normal and need cause no concern.

When you feel ready, open your eyes and orientate yourself back into your room with gentle movements of the head and noticing colours and objects around you.

If you experience difficulty falling asleep at night or getting back to sleep, when awake in the middle of the night, then this exercise may be a godsend for you. Many, many people have commented upon how quickly this exercise has helped them with sleep problems. Accept that it may take a few days or weeks to work but practise the above exercise while lying on your back in bed before going off to sleep. Repeat it if you wake in the night and your thoughts are racing. It will help switch off the thinking mind.

4. Quick 1/2 Minute Relaxation

When at work or when traveling, you may wish to develop a regular practice of triggering the relaxation response. This can be done by focusing on your eyes, tongue, lips, jaw, chest and stomach as parts of the body which you can relax. Focusing on these body parts, experiencing their sensations and movement and allowing your breathing to deepen may all help trigger the relaxation response. The more often the better if you know you are experiencing a lot of sympathetic nervous system activation.

NB These quick exercises are not meant as an alternative to the exercises above but as a means to more regularly develop the habit of relaxing.

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